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ABSTRACT

Discusses the increasing number of students with psychological disabilities attending community colleges. In efforts to meet these students' extended support needs during times of budget cuts, the College of San Mateo, a community college, has organized partnerships within the local mental heath, rehabilitation, and consumer groups. Since 1991, the college has been working with these groups and agencies in the Entitled Transition to College (ETC) program, which helps these students adjust and cope with the college experience. These agencies contribute to the partnership by providing staff to serve and support students on the college campus as managers, co-instructors, consultants, trainers, and supervisors. They also assist in student recruitment, intake, registration, orientation, and help provide educational supplies. The college supplies a part time counselor/specialist, a part-time coordinator/career instructor, and office space for community providers. Results indicate increased student retention and success without an increase in commitment of staff time by the college. Attrition rates for students with psychological disabilities prior to the ETC program were about 95 percent. Since the program's implementation, the attrition rates have decreased to approximately 20 percent. Discusses how to create such programs and partnerships at other institutions. Contains an outline/summary of the program, and a list of community agencies and their contributions. (JS)

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Community Partnerships Increase Services and Outcomes for Students with Psychological Disabilities

Tim Stringari

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Community Partnerships Increase Services And Outcomes For Students With Psychological Disabilities

Tim Stringari, M.A., M.F.T.

March 2003

The Challenge

Eleven years ago the California Education Code was amended to include services to students with psychological disabilities. Since that time, because of increasingly effective medications and a growing consumer empowerment movement, the numbers of persons attending community colleges who are in the process of recovering from mental illness has increased to become the fastest growing disability group on our campuses. It is likely that this trend will continue because it is estimated by the National Institute of Mental Health that one in five Americans over the age of 18 will suffer from a mental disorder in any given year.

Although it is true that students with psychological disabilities require the same basic accommodations that are required by other disability groups, most DSP&S (Disabled Students Programs and Services) and student service professionals now recognize that students with psychological disabilities have service needs that are unique in a few important ways. First, the functional limitations presented by their disability fluctuate over time, and therefore require regular monitoring in order that the appropriate level of support can be provided. Second, because these students are very vulnerable to stress, they are at exceptionally high risk of dropping out of school as a way of coping with academic or social pressures. These factors create the need for greater one-on-one staff time devoted to planning, counseling, academic programming and monitoring. Under present conditions imposed by cuts in California State funding, this kind of intensive support is more than most colleges can provide without greatly taxing their resources and exhausting front line staff.

How then are we to meet this challenge? At College of San Mateo, a community college located near San Francisco, California, our response has been to develop and strengthen partnerships with the mental health and rehabilitation community.

The Partnership

For the past eleven years, College of San Mateo (CSM) has been providing academic and disability related counseling, special emphasis career instruction, accommodations and peer support to students with psychological disabilities through its supported education program. Entitled Transition to College [see Appendices A and B for more information], the program is maintained by an active and vibrant partnership between the college and local mental health and rehabilitation agencies and consumer groups. These agencies and groups were instrumental in the development of the program in 1991 when CSM became

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a Model Service site for the California State Chancellors Office and have continued as partners with CSM since that time.

The agencies contribute to the partnership by providing staff to serve and support students on the college campus as educational case managers, co-instructors for special career classes, consultants to college staff, and trainer/supervisors for peer counselors. They also assist in student recruitment, intake, registration and orientation as well as contributing to a book fund and providing educational supplies. The college provides a part-time academic counselor/DSP&S specialist, a part time coordinator/ career instructor and office space for community providers. The result has been an increase in student retention and success without an increased commitment of staff time by the college.

Educational Outcomes

Prior to the development of the Transition to College program, the attrition rate for students with psychological disabilities was approximately 90% to 95%. Since the implementation of the program the attrition rate for students enrolled in the program has only been 17% to 20%. Performance surveys show that students complete 90% of the courses in which they enroll with grade point averages between 2.0 and 3.3. In the Spring of 2002 one graduating Transition to College student was honored at CSM's graduation ceremony as one of two students who achieved a 4.0 GPA. Certificate, degree and transfer rates among Transition to College students are identical to the general college population.

Rehabilitation and Recovery Outcomes

Research conducted on the CSM campus and at other colleges and universities nationwide reveals that students enrolled in a supported education program such as Transition to College report a greater level of satisfaction with their quality of life than persons recovering from mental illness who are not attending college. These same students also had decreased incidence of hospitalization and over half are employed in their community.

Motivation

The partnership is maintained and reinforced by a monthly meeting of all participants including students. During the meetings, the program is monitored and modified to meet current needs and available resources. Representatives from the partnership also meet monthly with other agencies involved with non-educational aspects of rehabilitation such as employment and housing in order to coordinate services. Both the college and the mental health community are motivated to work together by awareness that they have overlapping missions. Mental health and rehabilitation agencies must assist and support their clients to assume meaningful roles in the community. Colleges must prepare these students with the skills and knowledge to assume those roles. Neither can achieve complete success with this disability group without the support and cooperation of the other. Continued success over the years through collaboration now fuels the process.

Creating Your Own Partnership

Developing a partnership with local agencies can be a relatively easy and rewarding process. You will likely find the mental health and rehabilitation community quite motivated to collaborate even though in California they like we, are experiencing large cut backs in state funding. This motivation is the result of the recent emphasis in mental health policy that focuses on supporting clients to assume meaningful roles in society, primarily through competitive employment. Since community colleges are the largest resource in any community for education and training, community providers want and need to establish pathways of access to college so that the people they serve can achieve their employment and career goals.

Possibilities

Partnerships with the mental health and rehabilitation community can assume many forms both large and small. As described above, collaboration between College of San Mateo and local community agencies is extensive. With the community's yearly in-kind contribution amounting to more than $100,000, regular contact and well committed relationships are required to keep things running smoothly. Other colleges and their local community agencies have established more modest partnerships requiring less maintenance and commitment of resources. Examples of some of these collaborations are: jointly sponsored orientations and campus tours for mental health consumers prior to the start of the school year; in-service trainings for faculty on psychological disabilities presented by mental health and DSP&S staff; and bi-annual meeting between DSP&S staff and community providers to coordinate services.

Although these smaller partnerships which focus primarily on access are a great way to start, partnerships which provide the greatest assistance to the college in terms reducing the need for staff contact with students are those which involve the assignment of community staff to the college. These also have the greatest impact on retention and course completion. Examples of some of these endeavors are: on- campus support groups led by mental health staff or peer advocacy groups; campus visits to students by mental health and rehabilitation case managers; career or disability management classes co-taught by college and community staff; and peer counseling provided by peers trained and supervised by community providers. These types of arrangements take more time to initiate and maintain but in the long run will pay off by reducing the time college staff will spend providing support to students and will result in boosting student retention.

Assistance Available

The State Departments of Mental Health and Rehabilitation (DMH/DR) support the development of partnerships between community colleges and their local mental health and rehabilitation agencies by providing consultation, training and technical assistance through a special cooperative unit.

In addition to assisting in the development of Transition to College, DMH/DR has helped CSM and its community partners to create a Human Services Certificate and Degree program and a Peer Support Services Certificate of Completion. Like Transition to College, these two new programs rely heavily on the involvement of community partners and focus on providing career opportunities for persons with disabilities.

For information about how to receive this type of assistance contact:

Edie Covent,
State Department of Mental Health,
4323 Palm Ave, Suite D, La Mesa, California, 91941.
(619) 645-2963 or
ecovent@inreach.com

Appendix A

Transition To College Program Summary – College Of San Mateo

Mental illness most often strikes individuals during their late teens and early twenties, at which time many are students whose education is then interrupted by the onset of their illness. Returning to college after an extended absence caused by mental illness can be difficult, if not impossible, without the availability of educational support services. College of San Mateo's Transition to College program has been highly successful in supporting individuals with psychological disabilities to attend college and achieve academic, vocational and/or personal goals. The program's unique approach combines special emphasis instruction, educational accommodations and peer support to assist students to succeed in college. Traditionally, the attrition rate for individuals with psychological disabilities has been exceptionally high as a result of anxiety, low stress tolerance, lack of academic and social skills, and low self-esteem. The Transition to College program, which was established in Spring 1991, has successfully reversed this trend at College of San Mateo; the program boasts a retention rate of 83 percent.

Accommodations Offset Limitations Presented by Psychological Disabilities

As part of a larger, established program for students with disabilities at College of San Mateo, the Transition to College program provides students with psychological disabilities individualized accommodations that offset limitations presented by their disability, which might otherwise affect their ability to succeed in college. These accommodations vary according to the needs of each individual and are arranged for or provided by Transition to College staff or peer counselors.

Accommodations and services most frequently utilized by students are:

- Disability-related counseling
- Study labs
- Liaison with faculty and other college staff
- Special college orientation
- Assistance with registration and financial aid
- Extended time and/or change of location for exams
- Special parking arrangements
- Note taking services and tape recorders
- Seating arrangement modifications
- Individualized study skills training

Special Class Sections, Counseling, and Peer Support Provide a Safe Re-Entry to College

Students in the Transition to College program experience a safe beginning, or re-entry, to college through attendance in courses on college orientation and study skills, disability management, and peer counseling; these are all specially designed with the needs of individuals with psychological disabilities in mind. The students report that the special

class sections are most helpful in providing encouragement and support and in developing their self-confidence in the college environment. As a result of the classes, staff have observed student improvement in the following areas:

- Higher self-esteem and increased self-confidence in the campus environment;
- Improved study skills and increased knowledge of campus resources;
- Improved interpersonal skills;
- Improved classroom skills (i.e., higher personal, academic and career goals; increased number of long-term goals).

Additionally, students in the program are advised and encouraged by counselors, educational case managers and peer counselors familiar with their disability who maintain liaison with their community therapists and social workers. Weekly support groups and study labs led by peers and staff provide additional support that focuses on mastering the college environment. These support services continue as students "mainstream" into general college courses.

Students Find New Hope

Students in the program are individuals who have severe mental illnesses, such as schizophrenia and manic depression. These students have been identified by community agencies working with the college and referred to the Transition to College counselor or case manager. The majority are unemployed and receiving disability assistance. Most have been ill for more than 10 years and have been hospitalized repeated, including lengthy stays at long-term hospitals for up to one year at a time. Seventy-five percent had attempted college unsuccessfully prior to enrolling in the program and had abandoned any hope of achieving educational or career goals.

Thus far the Transition to College program has served more than 1000 individuals over a period of ten years. Approximately 100 students are presently active in the program each semester.

Retention, Performance and Student Satisfaction High

Retention, student satisfaction with services, and academic performance have been used to measure the success of the Transition to College program. Prior to the program, the attrition rate for students with psychological disabilities on the college campus was approximately 90-95 percent. Since the implementation of the program in 1991, the attrition rate for students enrolled in the Transition program has been only 17 percent.

Student satisfaction has been assessed on a continuous basis since the program's inception through the use of focus groups, individual interviews and surveys. The following is a summary of student feedback:

- Students' main concerns upon entering the program are centered around prejudice, rejection and ridicule, social interactions with peers and instructors, the cost of books and materials, stress overload, inability to concentrate, fear of

failure, and lack of self-confidence.

- The students report that sensitivity to these concerns and encouragement provided by staff and peers are the most helpful aspects of the program. Peer-led support groups, disability-related counseling, prescriptive academic programming, special emphasis courses, financial aid application assistance, registration assistance, and special college orientation were ranked as the most helpful accommodations and services.

Performance surveys show that students complete 90 percent of the courses for which they enroll, with a GPA of 3.3. Transfer, degree and certificate completion rates are equal to the college's general population.

Community Involvement Key to Program's Success

One of the strongest points of the program, and key to its success, is the liaison and inter-referral of the Transition to College staff with San Mateo County Mental Health Services, the Mental Health Association of San Mateo County, Alliance for the Mentally Ill, Peninsula Network of Mental Health Clients, National Outreach for Mental Health, Caminar Supported Housing, County Vocational Rehabilitation Services, and the California Department of Rehabilitation Services. These community agencies and consumer groups were instrumental in the development of the program and continue to actively participate with the college by contributing staff time as co-instructors for the specialized courses, consultants to college personnel, educational case managers and supervisors for peer counselors. They also assist by providing funds for books, art supplies and peer counselors.

Background and Development

Prior to the initiation of the Transition to College program at College of San Mateo, few if any special services or accommodations were being offered to persons with psychological disabilities attending community college in California, although access to these accommodations and services was mandated by law under Section 504 of the 1973 Rehabilitation Act. This was in part a result of the fact that "psychological disability" was omitted from state categorical funding for disabled students until December 1992, providing community colleges no economic incentive to serve students with mental illnesses, and in part due to the perception that this population is too sick, disruptive or academically unskilled to succeed in higher education.

In 1990, a growing mental health consumer movement in San Mateo County began to focus on the lack of supportive services for the psychologically disabled at local community colleges and a coalition of consumer groups approached the San Mateo County Community College District to request the development of services and programs.

Faced with budget reductions and lack of state categorical funding for this population, college administration could not immediately fund new programs, but offered to meet with the groups on an on-going basis to pool resources and seek outside funding to expand services and develop programs. In Spring 1991, the college, assisted by and in cooperation with this coalition, applied for and received funding from the State Chancellor's Office to develop a model service site for students with psychological disabilities at College of San Mateo. As a model service site, the college was instrumental in changing state categorical funding policies to include students with psychological disabilities. Since the completion of its responsibilities as a model service site in 1992, Transition to College has become an established part of College of San Mateo's Special Programs and Services division.

Research

In addition to serving as a model site for the State Chancellor's Office, Transition to College has twice served as a research site for nationwide studies on supported education: 1991-1994, Boston University; 1995-1998, University of Arizona.

Awards

The program has received recognition through the following awards: Pyramid Award for Outstanding Achievement in Student Development, awarded by the Interassociation Group, a coalition of three national Student Services Student Development organization; presented at an Interassociation Conference which focused on national priorities for the 90's, held in Chicago, Illinois in October 1992; Recognition Award for "Outstanding Dedication, Effort and Support to those with Mental Illness and their Families", awarded by the San Mateo chapter of the Alliance for the Mentally Ill, April 1993; A.J. Russell Kent Award, from the San Mateo County School Boards Association, April 1994; and semifinalist in the Ford Foundation's 1994 Innovations Awards.

For further information on the College of San Mateo's Transition to College program, contact
Tim Stringari,
Program Coordinator
(650) 574-6193.

Appendix B

Collaboration With Community Agencies – College of San Mateo
Transition to College Program for Students with Psychological Disabilities

Collaboration with community agencies and consumer groups is key to the success of College of San Mateo's Transition to College Program (TTC). Since 1991, members of the College of San Mateo (CSM) administration and faculty have met monthly with representatives from various county mental health agencies and consumer groups to develop and maintain collaborative educational support services to students with psychiatric disabilities. These agencies and groups have accepted various responsibilities as part of a joint effort to support students with psychological disabilities to be successful.

Key agencies and their specific contributions are:

San Mateo County Mental Health Services

- Assists in recruitment of students
- Provides consultation to Transition to College staff
- Hosts, with the CSM, in-service trainings for County Mental Health staff and other community providers on supported post-secondary education
- Provides, through contracts with other non-profit agencies, a peer counseling instructor/supervisor, instructional assistants for skill development and orientation to college classes, and an on-campus educational case manager to assist students with difficulties affecting school progress
- Seeks out grants and funding sources to support various TTC program components

Caminar: A Rehabilitation Agency

- Acts as a source of student referral to the project
- Serves as the main contractor for San Mateo County Mental Health in providing case management, peer counseling training and supervision, instructional assistants to the TTC program
- Consults to program staff
- Writes funding proposals and administers grants that support various TTC components
- Assists the college in the development of specialized curriculum for career and human services classes utilized by the TTC program.
- Hosts parties, graduation celebrations, trainings and events

Mental Health Association of San Mateo County

- Assists in student recruitment
- Writes funding proposals and administers grants received
- Facilitated the consultation and research collaboration between College of San Mateo and Boston University's Center of Psychiatric Rehabilitation

- Provides leadership in the collaboration of community agencies and the College of San Mateo

San Mateo County Vocational Rehabilitation Services

- Provides job development and job placement for students
- Assists in student recruitment
- Provides off-campus monitoring of students
- Provides consultation to Transition staff
- Assists students with vocational goals to access State Department of Rehabilitation funding and services
- Assists the college in the development of curriculum for human services and career classes utilized by the TTC program

Jobs Plus

- Provides job placement and job development for students
- Provides consultation to TTC staff
- Seeks funding to support job retention services for working students
- Provides guest instructors for TTC career classes

National Alliance for the Mentally Ill

- Assists in student recruitment
- Provides consultation and supportive materials to Transition staff
- Provides leadership in contact with legislators regarding funding augmentations for services to students with psychiatric disabilities
- Provides book scholarship fund
- Holds fundraising events to benefit Supported Education

Peninsula Network of Mental Health Clients

- Assists in student recruitment
- Provided an in-service training for College counseling staff on removing the stigma of mental illness
- Provides student speakers for various conference presentations related to this program
- Contributes to a book scholarship fund

National Outreach for Mental Health (Stomp Out Stigma)

- Provides anti-stigma presentations to College faculty, staff and students

Proper coordination with community agencies is essential to the process of recruiting and screening potential students, disability verification, crisis intervention and student monitoring. Important to this process is the active involvement and support of College administration in the development and maintenance of agreements with community groups.

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